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# Discovering How the Pieces Fit Together: An Interdisciplinary Research Project Integrating the Disciplines of Elementary Education and English

ANGELA SKRABEC

## Introduction

When I began my research project roughly two and half years ago, I had one main goal in mind: to find out the reasoning behind Massachusetts mandating Elementary Education majors, like myself, to have a second major in the sciences or the humanities. My mind was consumed with the fact that I wanted to become an elementary school teacher, so why in the world would the state require me to have two complete undergraduate degrees when I would really only use my degree in education? This question is what sparked the whole idea of performing an interdisciplinary undergraduate research project. The purpose of my study was to become an expert on the initial interaction between Native Americans and English explorers in the

New World during the 1600s and then to apply my knowledgeable background of first encounters to selecting high quality children's literature written from multiple perspectives to create a text set to be used in a fifth grade classroom.

Throughout my research, the lines of separation between my two majors became blurred as I constantly crossed over critical and close reading techniques I had learned from both my Elementary Education and English majors, found opportunities to incorporate college level English texts into the elementary classroom, and discovered the importance of building a solid background on historical events prior to developing a text set to be used in the classroom. All of a sudden, my double major became a unified blend of equal parts Elementary Education and English. I could clearly see how an English degree fit into my future career as a classroom teacher. By the conclusion of my project, it had become less about the state requirement for education majors to have a second major in a content area and more about preparing myself to become the best possible educator.

## Introduction to the Study

The initial interaction between Native Americans and English explorers in the New World during the 1600s is a topic mandated by the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks to be covered in the fifth grade. Textbooks often provide students with a single perspective of the First Encounters, usually from the English colonial perspective, but rarely show the complicated reality of the historical occurrences. In addition to studying and compiling a list of texts appropriate for use in the fifth grade classroom, my study examined the influence that a knowledgeable background of First Encounter texts has upon the quality, multi-perspective children's literature brought into a fifth grade classroom.

*United States and Its Neighbors: Social Studies for a Changing World* is a fifth grade textbook used in Massachusetts Public Schools (Appendix A). This text presents the encounter in a basic, one-dimensional manner. The interaction between the two groups is introduced by claiming "One day, an Indian walked into Plymouth.

To the surprise of the colonists he said ‘Welcome!’ and asked for a drink” (Banks et al. 2005). The text treats the encounter as if the natives just happened to stumble upon the colony of Plymouth and made the decision to aid the English by teaching them how to plant and grow food. The idea that the colonists are the ones who arrived and took the land away from the Indians is not even remotely mentioned. In a later chapter, King Philip’s War and the Pequot War are explained in three small paragraphs by giving a quick account of what happened without digging deeper to expose the tensions and emotions surrounding these wars. No primary sources are referenced in these lessons. The text neglects to fully explain and expand upon the cultural knowledge and practices that the English and the Indians brought to these encounters. The religious beliefs of the English are mentioned in an earlier chapter, however are not recalled in these passages or brought into connection with the encounters. The one sub-topic that the text does a thorough job of explaining is the differing views of land ownership that the Indians and the English held. It sets up a debate between the two sides and shows students the arguments of both. Overall, what this textbook is missing is a multi-perspective, in-depth explication of the cross-cultural experience that occurred between the Indians and the English during the First Encounters. It was with this evidence in mind that I saw a need and proposed that, through the completion of my research project, I would be able to supplement the information found in the textbook with quality children’s literature that would give students a comprehensive, multi-perspective view of the First Encounters.

This interdisciplinary research project integrated training and techniques from two disciplines: English and Elementary Education. The purpose of the project was to immerse myself in the scholarly study of First Encounter (encounters between the natives and English settlers in the New World) texts in order to create a fifth grade text set, a selection of approximately twenty to twenty-five quality children’s books that represent a diverse range of reading levels and genres. My research entailed reading a variety of First Encounter literatures and using New Historicism to analyze each as part of my English scholarship. In addition, after reviewing research

on literacy education, particularly reader response theory and critical literacy, I developed a fifth grade text set on the First Encounters.

### **My Text Set: “First Encounters: An In-Depth Look at Native/Settler Interactions in New England with a Broad Overview of Native/Settler Interactions across North America”**

At the culmination of my research project, I produced a fifth grade text set on the First Encounters. The text set includes 21 texts from multiple genres including children’s books, novels, and digital texts (Appendix B). All of the children’s literature ranges in reading level from kindergarten through eighth grade. In this First Encounters text set, the texts are broken up into smaller categories within the broader topic. There are six categories with a timespan that starts with Columbus in 1492 all the way through to the late 18th century, covering many Native American First Encounters across North America. Each text was scored using a rubric that I developed and inter-rater reliability to diminish personal bias. Only texts which scored an overall rating of either ‘excellent’ or ‘good’ on the rubric were included in the text set.

### **Development of Rubric**

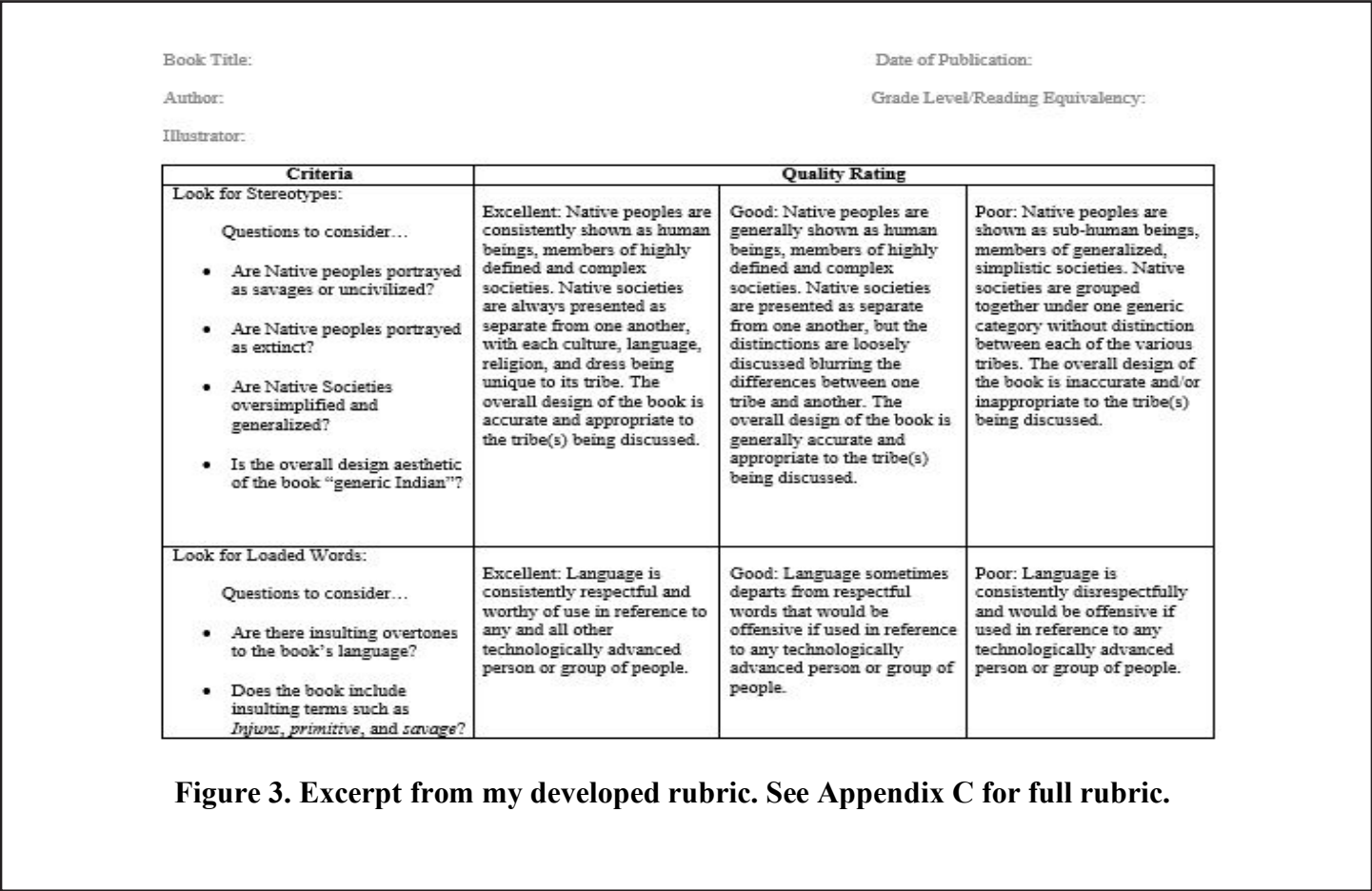
In order to determine which texts were exemplary, my Elementary Education mentor and I developed a rubric that would analyze potential supplemental texts for cultural authenticity and historical accuracy as objectively as humanly possible. To begin, I looked at other rubrics from the field of Elementary Education and the field of literacy education which had similar goals in mind: rating children’s literature on an objective scale of Excellent, Good, or Poor. Using my critical literacy skills from both my English and Elementary Education disciplines, I tried to answer questions such as: Who is the author of this book? What makes him/her qualified to write about Native peoples? How would a Native American child feel after reading this book? The next and final step was stumbling upon the website of Oyate (means “The People”), a Native American/American Indian advocacy and educational organization. Using criteria adapted from *How to Tell the Difference* by Doris Seale,

Beverly Slapin and Rosemary Gonzales, my mentor and I developed a rubric.

### Use of the Rubric

Supplemental texts were analyzed using a six page rubric (Appendix C) which looked at several categories such as historical

text was then given based upon the majority rating among all thirteen categories. In order to make this rubric as objective as possible, my Education mentor and I used inter-rater reliability where we would both separately read and analyze the texts using the rubric and then discuss our ratings and reasoning behind the rating that was given.



representation and the role of elders. Each category featured guided critical questions which were specific to that particular category. A scale of excellent, good, and poor was used to rate each category. Figure 3 shows an excerpt from the rubric. This ensured that texts with one poor rated category would not receive an overall lower text rating. In addition, at the bottom of each rubric, author and illustrator information was provided as well as notes on the strengths, concerns, and suggested classroom uses of the text. An overall rating of the

### Discussion

#### Selection of Texts

In the English discipline, my mentor and I shared the responsibility of selecting First Encounters primary and secondary sources to form the basis of my knowledge of the First Encounters. I had read a few of the texts before when I had taken her Early American course, but most of the texts were new to me. Our goal was to locate a variety of texts written during the time period as well

as after the time period, so that my foundational knowledge on the First Encounters was developed from multiple points of view (i.e. colonists, Native Americans, varied socioeconomic status, men, and women) to give me the most accurate picture possible.

Choosing texts to be included in my text set was a lengthy process filled with several weeks of research and of course reading. I gathered as much information and knowledge on the topic of First Encounters as I possibly could. I sought advice from one of my English professors who happens to be of Native American descent, consulted professional texts for elementary educators (i.e., *Broken Flute*), and researched online using children's literature databases. With the help of my mentors, I came to define 'texts' very broadly including books as well as pictures, maps, audio-visual presentations, or artifacts. Although children's books made up the major category of texts that I analyzed, I did evaluate other texts such as a children's coloring book and a Plimoth Plantation DVD. All of the texts that were selected as part of the text set were analyzed using my self-developed rubric that reviewed the texts on their culturally authenticity and historical accuracy of the First Encounters.

## Experiences

During my research experience, I had the opportunity to undergo a unique undergraduate research experience. My project incorporated dual elements from English and Elementary Education which allowed me to explore the usefulness of an English background in the Elementary classroom. I loved having the multi-perspective outlook as I read English texts in search of historical truth that would help me to better understand the circumstances of the Pilgrims and Wampanoag Natives living in the New England area. With a deep understanding of the First Encounters between the two sides, I was able to develop a First Encounters text set that would share my new historical knowledge with elementary students on a developmentally appropriate level. The line of separation between my two disciplines became forever erased with the experience of my interdisciplinary undergraduate research project.

Prior to this project, I had never experienced the role of

actively participating in my disciplinary field of English. I read all the time for my English courses and discussed literature on a regular basis, but the reading and discussion for my project was different. Instead of being handed a list of texts to be read, my mentor and I selected sources together. I got to go inside Governor William Bradford's head when I read *Of Plymouth Plantation*, and I took a side in King Philip's War while reading Jill Lepore's *In the Name of War*. These texts brought history alive through their detailed descriptions of war, captivity, and colonial/native relations. Reading different primary and secondary sources each week allowed me to thoroughly research a very complex time in America's history. My foundation of First Encounters knowledge grew on a weekly basis with my reading, reflections, and meetings with my mentor. After reading each text, I had the outlet of my blog to analyze and review the texts. At our weekly meetings, the one-on-one discussions of texts were complex and thought-provoking. I would read a text for the week and come to the meetings ready to share my opinions. Sometimes I would walk in the door having strong feelings against something and by the time I walked out my feelings had totally shifted. Having face-to-face conversations with a scholar in the field (my mentor) made me realize that I was a part of the English community. No longer was I just sitting in a classroom taking college English courses, but I was actually performing scholarly research in the field.

Throughout the project, I took on the role of an elementary teacher whose responsibility is to teach to state curriculum standards using the best practices, such as reader response theory and critical literacy. My elementary education mentor and I reviewed the fifth grade social studies textbook and came to a consensus that supplemental materials were needed to provide students with a comprehensive point of view on First Encounters. My job was to develop a text set that would meet the fifth grade curriculum standards while still giving students a historically accurate and cultural authentic perspective on First Encounters. My mentor from the field of Education facilitated this goal by assisting me in taking my solid foundation of knowledge on the First Encounters and applying this knowledge to finding the best First Encounters texts that the world of children's literature has

to offer. With the guidance of my Elementary Education mentor, I researched using the Comprehensive Children's Literature database, collected potential texts from all over the Southeastern Massachusetts library network, and then realized that I needed a regulated system of rating the texts that I found. Being a future teacher, I worked with an expert in the field of Elementary children's literature (my Elementary Education mentor) to create an extensive rubric (6 pages in length) so I could score each text against the same criterion. It was a process to go through countless children's texts just find the best twenty-two First Encounters children's texts available, but it was well worth it. These experiences are exactly what an elementary teacher goes through when they are planning a new unit of study and need great supplementary materials to balance the information from the textbook. This research project was a realistic experience of what it is like as an elementary educator.

### Concluding Insights

Despite what people might think, educators do not have the summers off. Last summer, I spent ten weeks developing my text set on the First Encounters and continued my analysis throughout the academic year. As a classroom teacher, I envision my summers as researching, planning, and developing great text sets that will supplement the information that is in subject area textbooks. I have seen the value of thoughtfully creating a text set that includes historically accurate and culturally authentic texts. I truly believe that text sets are a great way to teach students new information. The state puts a lot of pressure on educators to meet the curriculum standards, but why not achieve the standard by introducing children to non-fiction picture books, providing students with culturally appropriate coloring pages, and showing them historically accurate representations of events from America's history? Educators have an obligation to teach to the standards, however, interesting and engaging presentations of material still can be achieved. Learning about the benefits of using reader response theory and critical literacy in the elementary classroom made me an advocate for educating students on how to closely read and question texts. Students as young as seven

can begin to view themselves as active readers who have a say in how they understand information presented in a text.

College level primary sources can also be used in the elementary classroom. Before this project, I would have never thought to incorporate a text that I read in my junior year of college into a fifth grade elementary unit on the First Encounters. Now, I cannot imagine teaching colonial captivity during King Philip's War to my future students without using Mary Rowlandson's text. This text would give students a raw perspective of a pastor's wife who spent months as a captive of the Wampanoag Indians. Granted the vocabulary may be a bit challenging, but I can thoughtfully select excerpts from primary source documents to use as learning tools for elementary students. It is so powerful to share a text that was written over four-hundred years ago by a person who lived during the time period and who actually experienced the event that we are now reading about in our social studies textbooks. There is no better way to learn about history than through the eyes, ears, and mouth of the people who lived that reality.

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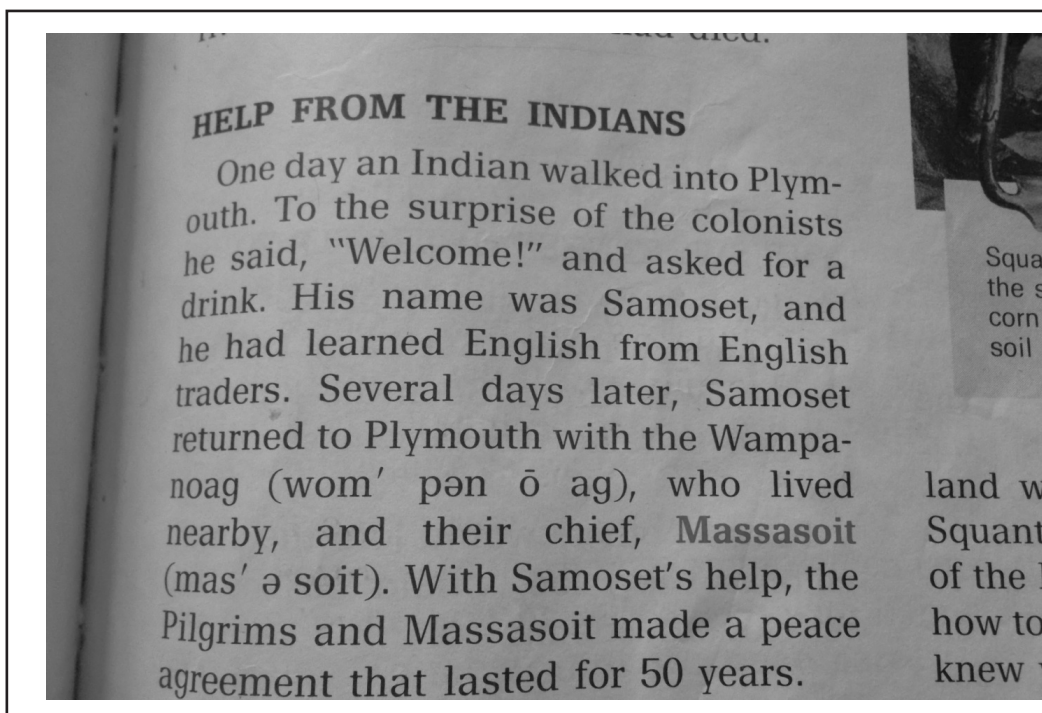
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## About the Author



Angela Skrabec graduated from Bridgewater State University in Spring 2015 with a bachelor's degree in Elementary Education and English. She graduated Summa Cum Laude with Departmental Honors. Her research project began in Summer 2014 as part of the Adrian Tinsley Program for Undergraduate Research. Under the dual mentorship of Dr. Jennifer Manak (Elementary Education) and Dr. Ann Brunjes (English), this interdisciplinary project was completed as an Honors Thesis in the spring of 2015. Angela is currently pursuing a career in the field of Elementary Education.

## Appendix 1





## Appendix B

### First Encounters: An In-Depth Look at Native/Settler Interactions in New England with a Broad Overview of Native/Settler Interactions across North America

Categories	Children's Literature	Scholarly Texts from the English Discipline which Inform Children's Literature Selections
Columbus 1492 – 1619	<i>A Coyote Columbus Story</i> (King, 1992)  <i>Morning Girl</i> (Dorris, 1992)	<i>After Columbus: Essays in the Ethnohistory of Colonial North America</i> (Axtell, 1988)  <i>Indian New England Before the Mayflower</i> (Russell, 1980)  <i>Rethinking Columbus</i> (Bigelow and Peterson, 1998)
Mayflower- English settlers who established Plymouth  1620	<i>Dear America: The Diary of Remember Patience Whipple</i> (Laksy, 1996)  <i>Thunder From the Clear Sky</i> (Sewall, 1995)	<i>Mayflower</i> (Philbrick, 2006)  <i>Of Plymouth Plantation 1620-1647</i> (Bradford, 1981)
Native/Colonial Encounters- Interactions between Native Americans and English settlers during the first two years of settling Plymouth including the "First Thanksgiving"	<i>1621: A New Look at Thanksgiving</i> (Grace and Bruchac, 2001)  <i>1621: Beyond the Myth of the First Thanksgiving</i> (Plimoth Plantation)  <i>Giving Thanks: The 1621 Harvest Feast</i> (Waters, 2001)	<i>Mayflower</i> (Philbrick, 2006)  <i>Of Plymouth Plantation 1620-1647</i> (Bradford, 1981)

1620 – 1621	<p><i>Guests</i> (Dorris, 1994)</p> <p><i>Squanto's Journey: The Story of the First Thanksgiving</i> (Bruchac, 2000)</p> <p><i>Thanksgiving: The True Story</i> (Colman, 2008)</p> <p><i>Thunder From the Clear Sky</i> (Sewall, 1995)</p>	
Native American Tribes of New England- An overview of prominent Native American tribes living in the New England region	<p><i>Crossroads America: Cultures Collide: Native Americans and Europeans 1492-1700</i> (Rossi, 2004)</p> <p><i>Malian's Song</i> (Bruchac, 2005)</p> <p><i>Tapenum's Day: A Wampanoag Indian Boy in Pilgrim Times</i> (Waters, 1996)</p> <p><i>The Pequot Tribe</i> (Lassieur, 2002)</p> <p><i>The Wampanoag of Massachusetts and Rhode Island</i> (Levy, 2005)</p>	<p><i>Early Native Literacies in New England: A Documentary and Critical Anthology</i> (Bross and Wyss, 2008)</p>
Rising Tensions between Natives and Colonists- Coverage of the Pequot War and King Philip's War including cause(s) and effect(s)	<p><i>King Philip's War: The Conflict over New England</i> (Mandell, 2007)</p> <p><i>Thunder From the Clear Sky</i> (Sewall, 1995)</p>	<p><i>Colonial American Travel Narratives</i> (Martin, 1994)</p> <p><i>Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England 1650-1750</i> (Ulrich, 1980)</p>

		<i>The Name of War: King Phillip's War and the Origins of American Identity</i> (Lepore, 1998)
First Encounters across North America- Encompasses a broad spectrum of different Native American/Settler interactions NOT specific to the New England region	<p><i>1607: A New Look at Jamestown</i> (Lange, 2007)</p> <p><i>Black Elk's Vision: A Lakota Story</i> (Nelson, 2010)</p> <p><i>Crossroads America: Cultures Collide: Native Americans and Europeans 1492-1700</i> (Rossi, 2004)</p> <p><i>Seneca Coloring Book</i> (Snow, Waterman, and Watt, 1979)</p> <p><i>The People Shall Continue</i> (Ortiz, 1994)</p> <p><i>The First Peoples of Ohio and Indiana: Native American History Resource Book</i> (Diemer-Eaton, 2013)</p>	<i>The Barbarous Years: The Peopling of British North America: The Conflict of Civilizations, 1600-1675</i> (Bailyn, 2012)

*Critical Literacy: Enhancing Students' Comprehension of Text* (McLaughlin and DeVoogd, 2004)

## Appendix C

Book Title:

Date of Publication:

Author:

Grade Level/Reading Equivalency:

Illustrator:

Criteria	Quality Rating		
<p>Look for Stereotypes:</p> <p>Questions to consider...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Are Native peoples portrayed as savages or uncivilized?</li> <li>Are Native peoples portrayed as extinct?</li> <li>Are Native societies oversimplified and generalized?</li> <li>Is the overall design aesthetic of the book “generic Indian”?</li> </ul>	<p>Excellent: Native peoples are consistently shown as human beings, members of highly defined and complex societies. Native societies are always presented as separate from one another, with each culture, language, religion, and dress being unique to its tribe. The overall design of the book is accurate and appropriate to the tribe(s) being discussed.</p>	<p>Good: Native peoples are generally shown as human beings, members of highly defined and complex societies. Native societies are presented as separate from one another, but the distinctions are loosely discussed blurring the differences between one tribe and another. The overall design of the book is generally accurate and appropriate to the tribe(s) being discussed.</p>	<p>Poor: Native peoples are shown as sub-human beings, members of generalized, simplistic societies. Native societies are grouped together under one generic category without distinction between each of the various tribes. The overall design of the book is inaccurate and/or inappropriate to the tribe(s) being discussed.</p>
<p>Look for Loaded Words:</p> <p>Questions to consider...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Are there insulting overtones to the book’s language?</li> <li>Does the book include insulting terms such as <i>Injuns</i>, <i>primitive</i>, and <i>savage</i>?</li> </ul>	<p>Excellent: Language is consistently respectful and worthy of use in reference to any and all other technologically advanced person or group of people.</p>	<p>Good: Language sometimes departs from respectful words that would be offensive if used in reference to any technologically advanced person or group of people.</p>	<p>Poor: Language is consistently disrespectfully and would be offensive if used in reference to any technologically advanced person or group of people.</p>
<p>Look for Tokenism:</p> <p>Questions to consider...</p>	<p>Excellent: Native Americans are consistently depicted as genuine individuals,</p>	<p>Good: Native Americans are for the most part depicted as genuine individuals, having</p>	<p>Poor: Native Americans are depicted as generic and superficial beings with</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do all the Native characters look alike?</li> <li>Do the Natives look like white characters with darker faces?</li> </ul>	having unique and complex qualities and characteristics.	unique and complex qualities and characteristics.	few identifiable qualities and characteristics.
<p>Look for Historical Representation:</p> <p>Questions to consider...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is there manipulation of words such as <i>discovery</i>, <i>victory</i>, or <i>massacre</i>?</li> <li>Are Natives represented as responsible for their “disappearance?”</li> <li>Is the United States depicted as “only trying to help?”</li> </ul>	Excellent: History is consistently placed in the proper perspective: the Native struggle for self-determination and sovereignty against the Euro-American drive for conquest and greed.	Good: History is generally placed in the proper perspective: the Native struggle for self-determination and sovereignty against the Euro-American drive for conquest and greed.	Poor: History is placed in the improper perspective: Natives are passively accepting defeat as the helpless victims of Euro-American rule. Natives are presented as being the reason for their own “disappearance.”
<p>Look for Victimization:</p> <p>Questions to consider...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Does the story encourage children to believe that the Natives accepted unjust treatment and defeat passively?</li> <li>Are Native heroes limited to those who helped the European colonists?</li> </ul>	Excellent: Natives are consistently shown as actively resisting the invaders or as continuing to work for self-determination and sovereignty in present day. Native heroes are always admired because of what they do for their people.	Good: Natives are generally shown as actively resisting the invaders or as continuing to work for self-determination and sovereignty in present day, but sometimes they are shown as the victims. Native heroes are generally admired because of what they do for their people.	Poor: Natives are not shown as actively resisting the invaders or as continuing to work for self-determination and sovereignty in present day. Native heroes are limited to those who helped the European colonists.
<p>Look at the Lifestyles: Cultural and Societal</p> <p>Questions to consider...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Are Native cultures presented in a condescending manner? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Are there paternalistic distinctions between “us” and “them”?</li> <li>Are Natives depicted as needing aid from outsiders, and having no ability to govern their own land and people effectively?</li> </ul> </li> <li>Are Native peoples discussed only in the past tense or are</li> </ul>	Excellent: Native peoples are consistently respected and there is a complete understanding of the sophistication and complexity of their societies. The continuity of their cultures is represented. Values, religion, and morals are connected to the present and are depicted as taking people into the future. Religions are discussed accurately. The dwellings depicted	Good: Native peoples are generally respected and there is a general understanding of the sophistication and complexity of their societies. The continuity of their cultures is represented. Values, religion, and morals are semi-connected to the present and are depicted as possibly taking people into the future. Religions are discussed accurately for the most	Poor: Native peoples are disrespected, and there is a lack of understanding of the sophistication and complexity of their societies. The continuity of their societies is not represented. Values, religion, and morals are not connected to the present and are not depicted as taking people into the future. Religions are not discussed accurately. The dwellings depicted are

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Does it require Native people to adhere to “white” values and standards in order to get ahead or experience success?</li> </ul>	integral to the growth, development, and success of Native peoples.	values are necessary for the growth, development, and success of Native peoples.	growth, development, and success of Native peoples.
<p>Look at the Role of Women:</p> <p>A question to consider...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Are women completely subservient to men?</li> </ul>	Excellent: Women are consistently depicted as integral and respected participants of Native society.	Good: Women are generally depicted as integral and respected participants of Native society. At times, women are depicted as subservient to men.	Poor: Women are depicted as subservient to men or are not depicted in the text at all.
<p>Look at the Role of Elders:</p> <p>A question to consider...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Are elders treated as a dispensable burden upon their people?</li> </ul>	Excellent: Elders are consistently treated as loved and valued custodians of the People’s history, culture, and life ways. Elders are depicted as active members of the community who positively contribute to the well-being of society.	Good: Elders are generally treated as loved and valued custodians of the People’s history, culture, and life ways. Elders are sometimes depicted as inactive members of the community who make small contributions to the well-being of society.	Poor: Elders are treated as demanding, nagging, and irritating burdens who hinder the prosperity and well-being of society or are not depicted in the text at all.
<p>Look for the Effects on a Child’s Self-Image:</p> <p>A question to consider...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is there anything in the story that would embarrass or hurt a Native child?</li> </ul>	Excellent: There is more than one positive role model with which a Native child can identify.	Good: There is at least one positive role model with which a Native child can identify.	Poor: There are not any positive role models with which a Native child can identify.
Look at Author and Illustrator Backgrounds:			



<p>Questions to consider...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is there an ethnocentric bias that leads to distortions or omissions?</li> <li>• Is the author/illustrator qualified to write about Native peoples?</li> </ul>	<p>Excellent: The author and illustrator's backgrounds qualify them to write about Native peoples. Their perspectives strengthen the work.</p>	<p>Good: The author or the illustrator's background qualifies him/her to write about Native peoples. His or her perspective strengthens the work.</p>	<p>Poor: Neither the author nor the illustrator's background qualifies them to write about Native peoples. Their perspectives weaken the work.</p>
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